

Part 2: The Context of the Work

Part 2 seeks to outline a context for my photographically-based research in the Eurocentric art (and particularly photography) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The range of possible reference points is enormous, and it is far beyond the scope or purpose of this exegesis to provide a scholarly overview of all aspects of even the art of the sublime, much less the numerous other reference points for my own work. Many areas of potentially relevant material are only alluded to briefly, or not mentioned at all. So the art of non-European cultures, such as Aboriginal Australian art, or the traditions of Asian art of potential relevance such as Sino-Japanese landscape painting and Zen drawing, are not mentioned at all. I will rather focus on aspects of particular importance to various elements within my own practice: nineteenth-century painting and photography relating to the sublime, which provided the specific background to my own studio-based research; and related photography of the twentieth century, against which my own contributions might be measured. Even within this more limited field my discussions are brief: not every painter or photographer of relevance will be mentioned, but I have selected specific artists or works to provide a context for intentions and pictorial strategies in my own artistic practice.

The voices of the sublime in nineteenth-century painting

From medieval times, religious themes formed the dominant subject of art. Increasingly, though, the secular began to gain ground through the practice of history painting, which initially validated itself through classical themes and motifs. Far down the scale of importance rested landscape. Although fragments of landscape appear as windows to the outside world as early as the Renaissance, these are only small sections of paintings devoted to the most important genre of religious subjects, or the more lowly genre of portraiture.

By the eighteenth century, however, landscape began to emerge as a genre of painting in its own right, coinciding roughly with the establishment of theories of aesthetics based on an appreciation of the specific qualities of landscape. Aesthetic theorists, most importantly William Gilpin, Edmund Burke, and Emmanuel Kant, attempted to differentiate between the varied experiences of the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime. Eighteenth-century landscape painting by artists such as Claude Lorrain typifies the aesthetics of the picturesque, in particular its rationally articulated representation of graduated spatial recession. In the pastoral Claudian landscape of bucolic splendor, nature is essentially always gentle, and tempered by the presence of humanity. In essence the landscape is inhabited, and nature and man are represented in mutually beneficial harmony.



Claude Lorrain, *Italian Landscape*, 1648, oil on canvas, 75 x 100cm.

In both art and literature, the nineteenth-century romantic movement continued to find inspiration in landscape. The English painter J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) was perhaps the pre-eminent artist of the sublime in the first half of the nineteenth century. Best known for his representations of the transcendent power of nature in subjects such as storms at sea and avalanches, his landscape paintings were celebrated by the influential English aesthete John Ruskin in his 1843 first volume of *Modern Painters*. Although Turner greatly admired landscape painters of the eighteenth century such as Claude and Salvator Rosa, his pictorial innovations in the loose handling of paint and his movement towards a reductive abstract sensibility are remarkable. But as William Rodner persuasively argues, one of the most interesting aspects of Turner's work was his ability to incorporate the new technology of the Industrial Revolution within his aesthetic sensibilities. Although Ruskin showed little enthusiasm for the 1844 *Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway*, describing it as evidence of what Turner "could do even with an ugly subject"¹⁵ such a painting was revolutionary not only in its masterful painterly abstraction but also in its appreciation of the awesome power of technology and the association of this with the forces of nature itself. The train and the viaduct it rides on are far from incidental, but are rather the dominant pictorial element in the painting, emerging in a dark powerful

¹⁵ Ruskin, *Works*, 35:601, quoted in William S. Rodner, *J. M. W. Turner: romantic painter of the industrial revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 148.

diagonal from the turbulent swirls of atmospheric light and color that represent the rain-sodden landscape. In his seascapes as well, such as *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* Turner was notable for his ability to build on the earlier Dutch tradition of marine painting and incorporate the newly developed steamship as a symbol of human technological power in a contest with natural forces.



J.M.W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway*, 1844, oil on canvas, 36 x 48.



J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842, oil on canvas, 36 x 48.

Claudian pictorial ideals and motifs continued to exert a wide influence on American landscape painting well into the nineteenth century.¹⁶ However, significant aesthetic shifts from earlier landscape painting are evidenced by the appearance of a new theme for American landscape art by the 1820s - wild, uninhabited nature. The nationalistic linking of nature to religion (that the sublime American landscape was God incarnate) might elevate landscape art to the status of religious and history painting. For Barbara Novak "the trinity of God, Man, and Nature was central to the nineteenth-century universe. Nature itself was illuminated by another Trinity: art, science, and religion." And "by...1836, the terms 'God' and 'nature' were often the same thing, and could be used interchangeably."¹⁷

The aesthetics of the sublime became an increasingly important aspect of nineteenth-century American landscape art. The awesome in nature, religion, science, nationalism, history painting, and the popular panorama coalesce in the realist works of artists like Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, who nonetheless relied heavily on the pictorial conventions of the picturesque. One can characterize much of their painting as the art of the spectacle: "grand opera" as Novak terms it¹⁸. Artists like Cole brought to landscape art the grand ambitions of the European tradition of history painting. Cole's two major allegorical cycles, the five part *Course of Empire* and the four part *Stages of Man*, required the viewer to move past the

¹⁶ For a full discussion of this see Barbara Novak's influential book, *Nature and culture: American landscape and painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980 and 1995).

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 18.

panels through a kind of proto-cinematic moral tale. This passage bears something in common with two other nineteenth-century motion machines for the static viewer: the train and the popular panorama. For the twentieth century, film and television fulfilled this role, and in the twenty-first perhaps it will be virtual reality.

Nowhere is the attempt to represent the awesome more apparent than in certain American landscape paintings of the 1840s to 1860s, by artists such as Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt. These large works impress by sheer scale alone, attempting to immerse the viewer in the space of the painting, and by analogy both its literal and symbolic subject. Waterfalls, icebergs, mountains, and chasms - all seem to roar with the power of unrestrained wildness.

Particular locations achieved mythic power in the nineteenth century as key sites of American sublimity.

And Niagara! that wonder of the world! - where the sublime and beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as though a great void had been filled in our minds - our conceptions expand - we become a part of what we behold! At our feet the floods of a thousand rivers are poured out - the contents of vast inland seas. In its volume we conceive immensity; in its course, everlasting duration; in its impetuosity, uncontrollable power. These are the elements of its sublimity. Its beauty is garlanded around in the varied hues of the water, in the spray that ascends the sky, and in that unrivalled bow which forms a complete cincture round the unresting floods.

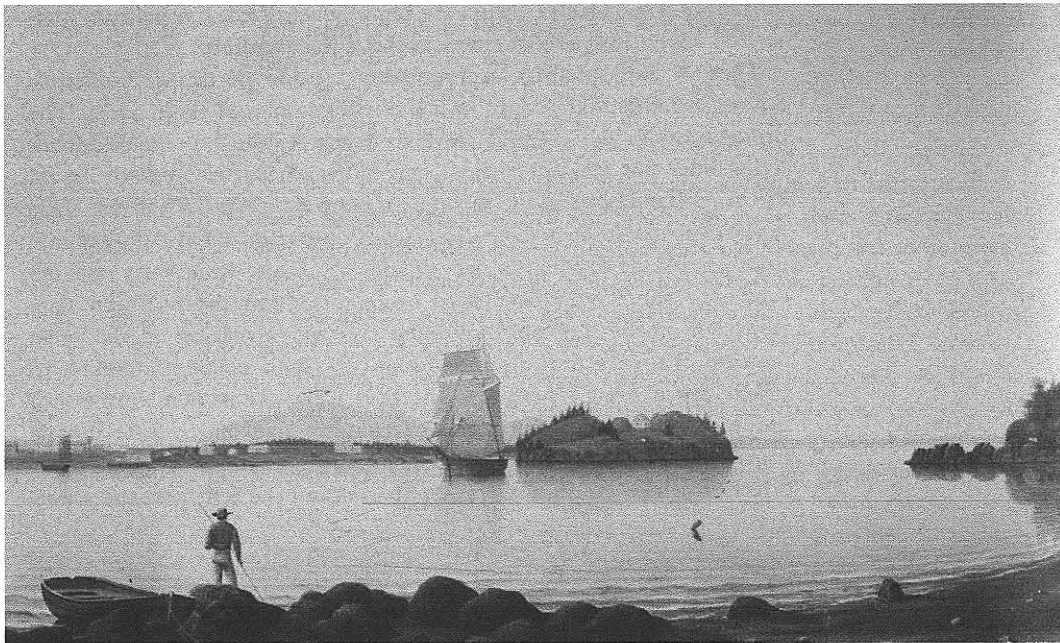
- Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery", 1835 ¹⁹



Frederic Church, *Niagara Falls*, 1857, oil on canvas, 108 x 230cm.

¹⁹ Quoted in Kynaston McShine et al, *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 96.

Consider Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls*, which encompasses an impressive 108 x 230cm of carefully painted realist detail. Everything in the painting is constant movement, from its insistent horizontality to the water itself. The horizontal format is a rhetorical highlighting of massive breadth over the actual drop of the Falls, linking the painting closely to the spectacle of the popular panorama. As viewers we stand at the brink of the Falls, in fact, any ground which might form some sort of stable site for the viewer is entirely absent. The painting seems entirely water, from the rushing cataracts and falls that form the entire foreground and middleground of the picture, to the clouds, mist, and rainbow which occupy the sky in the top third of the painting. The rainbow leads our eye from the upper left corner of the picture in a descending arc into the mist-filled abyss the dominates the center of the work. Our eye may travel out and along the brink of the curved Falls, either in the background which parallels and is virtually congruent with the horizon, in along the diagonal line of the section closest to us. Either way we are drawn irresistibly back to this chasm in the center, sucked into the void by the insistent pull of the rushing water. As Barbara Novak points out, there is essentially a baroque sensibility in this kind of operatic painting, both in its theatrical pictorial means and its representation of nature in a perpetual state of becoming.



Fitz Hugh Lane, *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine*, 1862, oil on canvas, 40 x 66cm (original in colour).

In contrast to this type of operatic expression of the sublime are the quieter, often much smaller works of the American Luminist painters like Martin Johnson Heade and Fitz Hugh Lane. Painted in a similarly detailed realist mode to Church's *Niagara*, but only one ninth of its size, Lane's *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine* (1862) measures a diminutive 40 x 66cm. Like Church's *Niagara Falls*, the painting's insistent horizontality is emphasized by its straight horizon line; however, this line is much lower

in the picture, allowing the luminous pale blue sky to dominate the image. Like Church, Lane also depicts water. The lower third of the painting is occupied by the waters of Penobscot Bay, reflecting back a golden light. In contrast to the relentless movement of Niagara, though, the water in Lane's Penobscot Bay is almost completely still, its surface broken only by the smallest of waves that gently lap the shoreline at the bottom of the painting. On this shoreline at the left stands a small figure of a man, his back turned to us, and he (with us) looks out over this still water to an almost becalmed boat in the center of the picture. However, it is not only the boat which is calm, but in fact all aspects of the painting, such as the small and regular clouds in the sky, are regular, measured, and quiet. With the still figure in the foreground, we are transfixed by this moment, which is not so much frozen, as slowed down to a transcendent, eternal present. There is a "classical" balance and stillness in these pictures, and a role for the figure, which relate them both to Dutch seascapes of the previous century, and the early nineteenth-century works of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840).

Friedrich's art arises out of a general context of German Romanticism, characterized by Joseph Leo Koerner as "a heightened sensitivity to the natural world, combined with a belief in nature's correspondence to the mind; a passion for the equivocal, the indeterminate, the obscure and the faraway (objects shrouded in fog, a distant fire in the darkness, mountains merging with clouds, etc); a celebration of subjectivity bordering on solipsism, often coupled with a morbid desire to be lost in nature's various infinities; an infatuation with death; valorization of night over day, emblemizing a reaction against Enlightenment and rationalism; a nebulous but all-pervading mysticism; and a melancholy, sentimental longing or nostalgia which can border on kitsch."²⁰ A signature element of many of Friedrich's paintings is the dominating presence of a figure or small group of figures, turned away from the viewer and into the landscape itself. The turned figure has a long presence in the history of Western art, going back at least to Giotto. Friedrich's "rückenfigur" distinguishes itself, though, in its tendency to evoke the act of contemplation itself.

In Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818) the turned figure with his back to the viewer is the focal point of the entire picture. The diagonal linear forms of the walking stick and the foreground rocks, the distant hills, even the clouds - all lead the eye to this still back, frozen in the act of looking itself. As a viewer we can only enter the picture by a process of substitution, becoming this anonymous back (and then perhaps feeling the curious sensation of a viewer's eyes upon our own back). However, the figure in Friedrich's painting does far more than serve simply to draw the viewer in by functioning as the surrogate for the viewer's self, although it may utilize this effect. The figure signifies the moral and spiritual intent of these pictures, which is to indicate nature's persona not only as evidence of Godly presence on Earth, but more importantly the

²⁰ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the subject of landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 23.

capacity for a direct communion with God in the experience of nature. Of key importance to this communion as represented by Friedrich are the sublime qualities of vastness, emptiness, stillness, and silence.



While Friedrich may vary the scale of the figures within his paintings, and the number of figures may be one, two, or even three, one aspect of the figure never changes. The figure's back is always turned to us, because the figure does not speak to the viewer. Frozen in a transcendent state, immersed in not only a literal but a spiritual space, the figures in his paintings face the subject of their communion.

Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1818, oil on canvas, 96 x 74 cm.

The sublime in nineteenth-century landscape photography

With photography's invention, painterly preoccupations and motifs relating to the sublime experience in nature were reincarnated. The recurring subjects of mountains, waterfalls, and seascapes run through nineteenth-century landscape photography from Australia, Asia, Europe, and America. Carleton Watkins is perhaps the pre-eminent American landscape photographer of the nineteenth century, and his images from 1861 on exemplify several aspects of nineteenth-century photographic representations of the sublime. With the expansion of the American frontier ever westward, iconic locations of American sublimity like Niagara were usurped by even grander Western sights. One such place was Yosemite Valley in California, a remarkable Sierra Nevada canyon carved by glaciers and rivers to create granite monoliths thousands of feet high. By the 1860's tourists were flocking to this scenic wonder near the California goldfields, drawn by reports of the awesome sublimity of its granite walls. Amongst the tourists were at least three photographers competing to sell views of this newly discovered natural icon. Charles Weed, Carleton Watkins, and Eadweard Muybridge almost literally followed in each others footsteps in their attempt to capitalize on the pictorial and commercial potential of this latest American natural icon.

All three photographers used the wet collodian negative process of the period, which required substantial skill and experience to evenly apply the wet emulsion to the glass plate in the field, immediately prior to making the exposure. To describe the grand space of Yosemite and outdo his competitors, as early as 1861 Watkins used a wide angle lens of about seventy degrees with a very large "mammoth plate" camera which could

expose glass negatives as large as eighteen by twenty-two inches²¹. He was able to flawlessly coat these large glass plates with the wet collodian emulsion and produce technically brilliant large scale albumen prints of Yosemite, which achieved considerable commercial and critical success. Among the contemporary admirers of Watkins's Yosemite views were the influential Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the landscape painter Albert Bierstadt.²²

However, it is not only its technical virtuosity which distinguishes Watkins's work but his refined aesthetic sensibility. As John Coplans describes it, "the strength of Watkins' photographs is not in the heights, the vastness of the sweep of the valley, the mysteriousness of the giant sequoias, or even in the predictable responses to the melodramatic valley. Rather, it is within the finely honed balance of his dramaturgy. Each natural part of the valley claims to define itself and its sense of sweep thrust, and energy, its feeling of upheaval. Watkins balances all these contradictory claims; he fits all the parts together so that nothing overwhelms. And by so doing he asserts his own artistry against man's generalized sense of awe of nature."²³



C. E. Watkins, *Yosemite from Mariposa Trail* (Yosemite Valley No. 1), 1865, albumen photograph, 42 x 52 cm.

²¹ Documented in Peter E. Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins, photographer of the American West* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1983), p. 12.

²² *Ibid*, p. 19-20.

²³ John Coplans, "C. E. Watkins at Yosemite," *Art in America* 66, no. 6, November/December 1978: 106.

Although, in general, Watkins's photographs are classical in composition, carefully balanced, and visually still, sometimes he could respond dramatically to the natural spectacle before his lens. Consider Watkins's 1865 photograph *Yosemite from Mariposa Trail* (*Yosemite Valley No. 1*). The view is taken from the edge of a precipice, looking across the Valley to the huge granite monolith El Capitan, which is seen in half light and shadow in the center background. The foreground barely exists from the high vantage point, except in the truncated form of a large tree silhouetted against the distant background of the far side of the Valley, which defines the left side of the picture. This is balanced on the right by the dramatic cliff of the Valley rim, the profile of which descends into the center of the picture, leading the eye down into the depths of the Valley and then immediately up the shadow line of distant El Capitan behind. Despite being a classically balanced and symmetrical picture, there is little hint of the Claudian picturesque's rationally articulated recession of space. Instead we find alternating dark and light forms in abrupt juxtapositions of foreground, middleground, and background elements, which suggest a catastrophic rupture of rational space, rather than a gentle journey through it.

Douglas Nickel notes that "nothing warped the nineteenth-century individual's perception of space more than the railroad. Unlike travel by horse or coach, the railroad involved speeds that distorted the passenger's familiar bodily relationship with landscape, sweeping its riders through space with such rapidity that visual impressions seemed to pile up progressively in number and intensity."²⁴ Through the patronage of his childhood friend, the Central Pacific Railroad baron Collis Huntington, Watkins used the railroad extensively to access photographic views. Like J. M. W. Turner, and other photographers of the railroad such as A. J. Russell and A. A. Hart, Watkins was often able to incorporate the new technology into his aesthetic of the sublime. In many of the photographs from his Columbia River and Oregon series of 1867, Watkins included the railroad, trains, or steamboats as prominent elements within the picture. In the view of *Cape Horn near Celio*, the straight line of the tracks recedes directly away from the viewer into the distance, reinforcing the sense of vast space in the image. The vertical lines of the tracks connect directly with the profile of the dark cliff that dominates the right side of the photograph, which is both visually striking, and also evokes a comparison of the enormous differences in timescales between the geological and the man-made.

²⁴ Douglas R. Nickel, *Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 30.



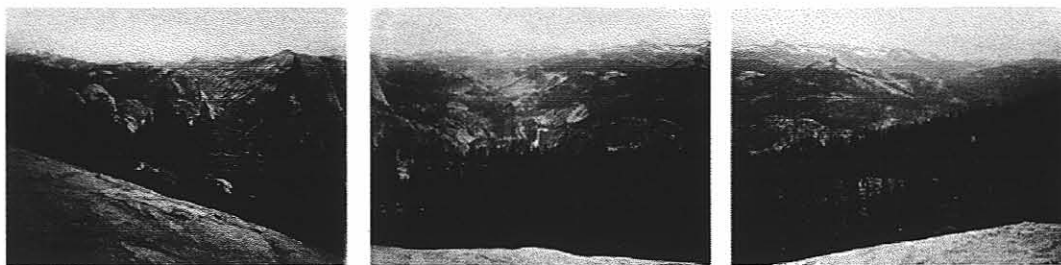
C. E. Watkins, *Cape Horn near Celio*, 1867, albumen photograph, 40 x 52cm.

Along with numerous other nineteenth-century landscape photographers, Watkins often constructed multi-part panoramas of sequential views, apparently in an attempt to encapsulate the awesome Western space which was so difficult to contain within a single view. Nickel makes a provocative association between the composite panorama and the rail traveler's view of landscape: "Watkins's vision of the West is in many respects railroad vision. The semi-continuous, flattened, enframed but open-ended treatment of landscape in his mammoth-plate panoramas bears a striking resemblance to what one would have seen through the windows of Pullman passenger car...; travelers in the moving compartment would find the foreground indistinct, but the middle ground and distance visually arresting, since these went by more slowly."²⁵

If Nickel's analogy has a flaw, it is in its disregard for the difference in the experience of motion between the view from the train and Watkins's panoramas. If we examine a typical Watkins panorama such as the three panel *View from the Sentinel Dome* (1865-66), it is clear that while the foreground view from a train would be rapidly moving and appear as a blur, in the Watkins photograph the foreground, while limited due to the high vantage point, is of course static and sharply detailed. While a dominant sensation of riding in a train is movement, the compelling aesthetic characteristic of Watkins's work, even in the composite

²⁵ Ibid, p. 31.

panoramas, is an essential quality of stillness. This is emphasized by the overriding symmetry of the picture. The three panel composition is centered around the distant waterfall in the exact middle of the center panel, and this panel itself is divided into roughly equal parallel bands of foreground, middleground, background, and sky. The left and right panels mirror each-other in their diagonal renderings of the same elements. Certainly the viewer's eye can roam across the sequential frames of the composite, or the endless detail within each image. Ultimately though, the freezing of time in the photographic exposure keeps Watkins's images suspended in this frozen Barthesian state, as still as a corpse.



C. E. Watkins, *View from the Sentinel Dome*, 1865-66, three albumen photographs, 40 x 52 cm each.

This aspect of stillness and the freezing of time in the photograph is most notable in those of Watkins's photographs that contain the element of moving water. This is evident in many of his Yosemite photographs, particularly those that depict waterfalls, where what we intellectually know to be rushing water is rendered as a milky smooth white by the length of the photographic exposure.



C. E. Watkins, *Sugar Loaf Islands, Farallons*, 1869, albumen photograph, 40 x 51cm.

We also see it in his images of the Pacific Coast, such as the series of views of the Farallons made in 1869. Here the rigid geological structures of the Sugar Loaf Islands rise up out of the perpetually churning surf, which is rendered in the time exposure as nebulous mists of white and grey. Of course from the perspective of a geological time-scale the rocks are moving as well, but from our human perspective we are struck by the silence and stillness of this cloud-like water, and the solemnity of the rocky mass rising out of it.

The American Civil War and expeditionary photographer Timothy O'Sullivan was also drawn to scenes of water such as lakes and waterfalls. The same sense of compelling stillness pervades many of these pictures. In his striking photograph of Pyramid Lake, Nevada from the 1867 King Survey, the rock masses of tufa domes rise in a progression out of the depths of the lake. The eerie quality of the photograph relates in large part to the luminous tones of the water, rendered misty by the length of the wet-plate photographic exposure.



T. H. O'Sullivan, *Pyramid Lake, Nevada*, 1867, albumen photograph, 25 x 30.5 cm.

As in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and American Luminists like Fitz Hugh Lane, the placement of a human figure in the landscape was an important device in much nineteenth-century photography as well, and sometimes this seems to heighten a sensation of contemplative stillness. O'Sullivan used the figure repeatedly in the images he made as part of the King geological survey of the West of 1867-69, and the Wheeler survey of 1871-74. In some of O'Sullivan's work, like that of other Western landscape photographers such as William Henry Jackson and Andrew Russell, the figure can become a cliché in its function as a scale reference, reminding us repeatedly of the vast expanse of the landscape by comparison with the small scale of the human within it. O'Sullivan's figures sometimes serve another function, however, that relates them to Friedrich's "rückenfigur".

This is particularly true in the series of photographs which O'Sullivan made in 1871 in the Black Canyon of the Colorado River. In a number of these images a figure in the foreground is seen in silhouette against the lighter tones of the water behind. Small but not minute in the frame, seated on the bank or in a moored boat, his back turned to us, the man seems to contemplate the awesome scene before him. Seen against the light sky, the half-shadowed canyon walls rise darkly up above him.



T. H. O'Sullivan, *Black Canyon, Colorado River*, 1871, albumen photograph, 25.0 x 30.5 cm.

The long photographic exposure has rendered the flowing water as a smooth and almost still surface, with only slight streaks like burnished silver to gently remind us of its relentless flow. And like Friedrich, with

the turned back of his figure, O'Sullivan evokes the experience of stillness in nature. We can enter the picture by becoming the figure, and experience that stillness ourselves.

These sublime themes of scale, space, and stillness are played out in much of the landscape photography of the nineteenth century. From Samuel Bourne working in the Indian Himalayas to Tasmania's Stephen Spurling, we find the recurrent subjects of mountains and rock formations, rivers, waterfalls and lakes. The legacy of the nineteenth-century sublime is also evident in much of the landscape photography of the twentieth century, most notably in Ansel Adams's operatic vision of the American West. Often working in Yosemite Valley, like Watkins, Weed, and Muybridge before him, Adams used his virtuoso tonal control through the Zone System to create highly dramatic renditions of the play of mass, light, and space. Unlike the low contrast, subtle tonal gradations resulting from the combination of wet collodian negative and albumen print used by the nineteenth-century photographers, Adams's higher contrast silver prints display an almost Wagnerian sense of drama having as much in common with the theatrics of painters like Church and Bierstadt as the quieter landscape photographs of the nineteenth century.

Coupled with their absence of humanity, Adams's wilderness images are a creationist vision of nature in a state of becoming, suggesting the first days of Genesis, prior to defilement by man. This legacy of the nineteenth-century sublime with all its spiritual trappings, transmitted through Adams, is also visible to varying degrees in much contemporary popular wilderness photography, such as the calendars, greeting cards, and books of Tasmania's Peter Dombrovskis



Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm*, Yosemite National Park, 1944, gelatin silver photograph.